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ABSTRACT

Two courses in the La Salle University (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) M.A. Program in Bilingual-Bicultural (Spanish) Studies are described: Urban Spanish and Caribbean Literature. The urban Spanish component consists of five courses, one of which is intensive, to provide broad exposure to the technical or practical Spanish encountered in the student's profession. Listening and speaking skills are emphasized. Cultural readers, introduced in the fourth course, serve as the basis for cultural discussions. The course in Caribbean literature is designed to reinforce the program's bilingual/bicultural orientation and is taught in English and Spanish. The syllabus includes representative works in drama, the essay, the novel, and poetry by eminent writers from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Colombia. Its focus is on Caribbean Spanish and Spanglish and social problems such as poverty and unemployment, drug addiction, alcoholism, social alienation, discrimination, and crime. This course also provides a forum for the kind of cross-cultural communication taught in other program segments. (MSE)

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A NON-TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF URBAN SPANISH AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

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A Non-Traditional Approach to the Teaching of Urban Spanish and Caribbean Literature

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The Master of Arts Program in Bilingual/Bicultural Studies (Spanish) at La Salle University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, arose out of the need to provide urban professionals in education, business, medicine, law enforcement, social work, and pastoral counseling with an alternative to traditional graduate programs in Spanish focused exclusively on Peninsular or Latin American literature. After three years of careful planning, the La Salle Program was inaugurated in September of 1982 as a multidisciplinary experience with components in urban Spanish; history; cross-cultural communications; Caribbean literature, art and music; and the methodology of teaching English to speakers of other languages. The Program is unique in that it allows for three tracks of students: Track I is for educators, school counselors, and Spanish and ESOL teachers; Track II, for nurses, police officers, social workers, and other urban professionals, including people from the business community; and Track III, for non-degree matriculants. I am concerned here, however, not with the overall structure of the program but rather with two of the courses: Urban Spanish and Caribbean literature.

The Urban Spanish segment of La Salle University's Program actually comprises five courses--Urban Spanish I through V--designed to give the urban professional the greatest possible exposure to the kind of technical or practical Spanish he or she needs in a chosen profession. To remain pertinent to the Spanish speaking population of Philadelphia and other urban centers of the Northeast, the courses in Urban Spanish incorporate, moreover, the pronunication and lexical variants of Caribbean Spanish, especially as spoken by Puerto Ricans.[1] The flexibility of the Program allows students who have never studied Spanish before the opportunity to begin language study in Urban Spanish I; more skilled students can be placed in the more advanced Urban Spanish III and IV courses; and Track I students--educators, school counselors, and teachers--are able to take two special courses in Spanish for educators. The Urban Spanish III course is particularly demanding since it is taught during the Spring Immersion, a 5 week intensive during which the students attend language class 4 evenings per week for a period of 1 and 1/2 hours.

The common text for the Urban Spanish I-IV courses is Basic Spanish Grammar, which in fact is the nucleus of a complete language course with supplementary manuals, tapes, and workbooks. The text presents Spanish grammar clearly and economically. The workbooks--which combine situational dialogues, dialogue completion exercises, question-answer exchanges, group

activities, and technical vocabulary study--parallel the text and stress the practical application and use of Spanish in the following professions: business and finance, law enforcement, medicine, teaching, social work, and communications. The special materials La Salle professors use for pastoral Spanish are equally practical.[2]

The courses in Urban Spanish give the greatest attention to developing good listening and speaking skills in Spanish but demand as well a high level of reading and writing proficiency. To facilitate comprehension and oral communication in Spanish, the courses are taught by native Caribbeans, assisted by native informants of Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Guatemalan origin who are thoroughly familiar with the pronunciation variants, intonation patterns, and lexicon of Caribbean speakers. Since most of the students who enter the program presently work or expect to work with Caribbeans, especially Puerto Ricans, the contribution of the native informants to the vitality of language instruction at La Salle cannot be underestimated. It is they who, under the guidance of the professors with whom they work, are able to work with Anglo students on an individual basis to help them master the complex rhythms and sound patterns of Caribbean Spanish. In addition, tape recorders, video cassettes, short wave radios, and the facilities of the language laboratory are all used to reinforce language learning on each level of Urban Spanish.

The Urban Spanish I-III courses integrate a variety of

effective strategies. Instructors generally devote 1 hour of their 3 hour class period to presenting and working with the grammar concepts from the basic text. During this segment, they make ample use of pattern practice, dialogue completion, direct method, and proficiency-based techniques.[3] During the second segment of the class period (also about 1 hour), students work in small groups with their instructor and the native informants on the material and technical vocabulary in the workbook which corresponds to their career interests. To maintain continuity, the workbook material is arranged to coincide with the lesson presented during the first hour of the class period. By individualizing instruction, the instructor and the native informants are able to work closely with each student on any problems associated with the material. During the last hour of class time, students re-group for spontaneous or directed conversation and response to situational exercises pertinent to their careers or of general interest.

After they complete the basic grammar text and workbook materials in Urban Spanish IV, students then begin cultural readers and primary sources related to an advanced review grammar book, which they carry over to and complete in Urban Spanish V. The readers deal with Hispanic culture and are intended to help the student relate cultural themes of interest to Spanish speaking peoples to their own professions. The selections in the reader include examples of excellent articles from Spanish journals and magazines, graded in difficulty from

moderately complex to very advanced.

The selections in the readers correspond to parallel chapters in the advanced review grammar text. The chapters of the text are divided into the following four sections: (1) a reading section included to facilitate comprehension and encourage discussion in Spanish; (2) a question section formulated to help the students make comparisons between their own culture and that of Hispanic peoples; (3) a vocabulary section; and (4) a special affective activities section designed to elicit sutdent participation in media role-playing, decision-making and problem solving situations, and interviewing.

The reading comprehension selections for Urban Spanish IV and V, both in the readers and the advanced grammar book, serve to motivate the student to initiate stimulating conversation in Spanish and to develop informed opinions about many aspects of Hispanic culture. For example, there are units on values and the Hispanic family, and there is even a unit on the significance of espiritismo among Caribbeans. Yet another chapter describes a typical botánica--like those that are so prominent in the barrios of New York City, Philadelphia, and other urban centers--in which one can buy the candles, incense, and other objects used in espiritista practice.

Students in the Urban Spanish sections are evaluated by both written and oral examinations. The oral examinations are generally given by two professors who are likely to first interview the student in Spanish and then ask questions about issues

that pertain to career interests or Hispanics. The written examinations are based on the grammar book, the material in the workbooks, the readers, and the advanced grammar book. The Urban Spanish I-III examinations incorporate situational dialogues related to the various professions represented by the students in the class. Thus, a nurse might be asked to write a situational dialogue of a specified length about an accident victim in the emergency room of the hospital who needs immediate surgery to save his life, or a police officer might be asked to devise a dialogue about a runaway adolescent found alone in a dangerous area of the city late at night. Practical in orientation, the examinations are challenging and require thorough familiariazation with the specialized vocabularies presented in the workbooks.

The second course which I shall describe--the course in Caribbean literature--was planned to reinforce the bilingual-bicultural orientation of the entire program. The reading list for the course consists of representative work in drama, the essay, the novel, and poetry by eminent writers from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Colombia. Two works in particular--Pedro Juan Soto's Spiks and poet Miguel Algarín's anthology, Nuyorican Poetry--are wonderful socio-literary documents for the study of Caribbean Spanish and Spanglish, as well as for the analysis of the many social problems, including poverty and unemployment, drug addiction, alcoholism, social alienation, discrimination, and crime, which plague the Puerto Ricans of New York City's

Spanish Harlem. Other works, such as Luis Rafael Sánchez's La pasión según Antígona Pérez and Alejo Carpentier's Recurso del método (translated into English as Reasons of State) deal with the politics of oppression and dictatorship in Latin America. Cien años de soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude), by the Nobel laureate Garbriel García Márquez, is an invaluable source for the study of the culture of Colombia and the Caribbean basin. In connection with this work, students view and are responsible for the contents of a filmed interview in Spanish with Márquez entitled "La magia de lo real."

Unlike traditional literature courses which stress literary theory, stylistics, and structural analysis, Caribbean literature in La Salle's M.A. Program stresses a socio-cultural approach to literature and literary history. For example, students not only learn the trajectory of Puerto Rico's literary history with the many trends that characterize it, but also study the socio-cultural connections between contemporary works and past litebrary expressions. They come to see, for example, that the issue of cultural conflict, so prominent in Soto's Spiks, even appears in Columbus' letters on the discovery of the New World.

Most innovatively, the course in Caribbean literature maintains a bilingual format throughout. Lectures and class discussions are conducted in both Spanish and English, and the students do most of their reading assignments in bilingual editions, except for One Hundred Years of Solitude and Reasons

of State, which they may elect to read in either the Spanish or the English editions. Hispanics who would profit from reading an English translation to test their comprehension of a long work are encouraged to read both novels in English; Anglos, on tne other hand, who are ready to do so are asked to read the same novels in the Spanish editions. All students read Sánchez's La pasión según Antígona Pérez in Spanish.

The bilingual format in Caribbean literature requires a skillful presentation and demands that the instructor devise and implement techniques to improve cross-cultural communication, bilinqualism, and bicultural understanding. One such technique that has proved useful involves recapitulation in either English or Spanish. The instructor may call on a student to summarize in English the main points of a presentation in Spanish, or he may ask one student to reinforce in English another student's analysis in Spanish of a specific literary passage. The dynamic interplay between Spanish and English (or vice versa) is integral to the course, and both Anglo and Hispanic students alike who have experienced it claim to have gained a better understanding of the problems of cross-cultural communication and the rewards of bilingualism. The bilingual format also allows the professor to intervene when a student is giving an answer in either language to make corrections. Students rapidly learn the value of immediate feedback from the professor and generally respond to questions and corrections in an uninhibited manner. The interactions between Anglo and Hispanic students is

especially important in Caribbean literature. Besides assessing what one student or another has to say about the assigned reading material, Anglos and Hispanics seem to learn to read each other's intonation patterns and non-verbal cues better. In short, the course becomes a kind of workshop for putting into practice concepts about communication discussed in the course in cross-cultural communication.

Students in Caribbean literature are evaluated on the basis of their class participation, mid-semester and final examinations, and term paper. The examinations consist of essay-type questions in English and Spanish on the readings. In keeping with the emphasis of the course, the questions stress either the sociological or political implications of the themes discussed in the readings during the semester. Students are encouraged to identify with each work and to take on its world view, so to speak, as if it were their own. Having done so, few, for example, would fail to respond with sensitivity to the great affirmation of human dignity and forceful outcry against social injustice so evident in Soto's Spiks and Alagarín's anthology, Nuyorican Poetry.

The Urban Spanish courses and the course in Caribbean literature in La Salle University's M.A. Program may be viewed as innovative, non-traditional experiences whose purpose, in addition to presenting a specific body of knowledge in a given subject, is to maximize bilingualism and bicultural understandings within the framework of a multidisciplinary

course of study. Urban Spanish and Caribbean literature enhance each other and can be taught so as to address, without sacrificing quality, the needs and interests of students who are searching for a practical approach to the use of Spanish in various professions. The scope of the Program, it seems to me, is at once a virtue and an expression of the integration of diverse disciplines in a coherent and meaningful way.

Notes

[1]As of 1980, about 116,280 persons of Spanish origin were reported to be living in Philadelphia and environs. In the City of Philadelphia, there were more than 60,000 Caribbeans in 1980, some 73% of whom were from Puerto Rico. There is every indication that the numbers have increased. See: Section 1 of 2, P-171, of the census tracts for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area in the 1980 Census of Population and Housing, published by the United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of Statistics, 1983.

[2]For a recent assessment of the need for Spanish speaking clergymen and women in the Catholic Church, the reader may wish to consult the following pastoral letter prepared by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops: The Hispanic Presence: Challenge and Commitment (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1984).

[3]See: Theodore V. Higgs, ed., Teaching for Proficiency, the Organizing Principle (Lincolnwood, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1984).